

SUNDAY, JUNE 26, 1904

BY
NORMAN
DUNCAN.

The Chase of the Tide

Author of
"The Way of the
Sea"

THE enviable achievement in his sight, was a gunwale load snatched from a lumpy sea; he had never heard of a pirate or a clown or a motorboat. From the beginning he was committed to the sea; for he was a Newfoundland of the upper shore, the child of a gray solemn waste place; a land of artificial graveyards. The lean rocks to which the cottages of Ragged Harbor cling like barnacles lie, a thin, jagged strip, between a wilderness of scrawny shrubs and the sea's fretful expanse. It chanced that Jo was the issue of a grunting arrangement, such as the gulls make—happily, had endured to the coming of a person of passage four years later. He had been brought to the young of the sea and the white bear, and he was nurtured into hardy childhood—into brown, lithe, quick strength—no more for that, for the young of the sea, obviously, then, was committed to the toil of the sea.

This was disclosed to him—this and the sea's enmity—while he was yet in a pinafore of hard-fact, creaking, months distant from his heritage of old homespun clothes.

"I low I catches nofish in Job Luff when I grows up," he boasted to Sammy Arnold, who had fished out of Ragged Harbor for sixty years, and was then past his labor. "I low I galls un better lot."

"I low," the child pursued steadily, "I catches moaren you done, Uncle Sammy."

"But by!" the old man cried in a rage. "They be moare quills in my name on Manuel's books in they be—un they be—folk in the world!"

They were on Lookout Head, waiting for the fleet to beat from a thick evening night; from this vantage Uncle Sammy swept his staff over the land, north to south, to comprehend the whole world.

"Is?" said Jo, doubtfully. It was not his understanding; so he crept to the edge of the cliff to watch the black tide roll ponderously out of the mist and shatter and froth over the lower rocks.

"The say do be hungry for lives this even," Uncle Sammy sighed. "Is un?" He shrank from the abyss, quivering.

He do be hungry this day. Jo strode forward, in wrath, then boldly he faced the sea, bearing it with clinched hands and dilated nostrils.

"This good for un!" Uncle Sammy laughed. "The say won't catch me!" the boy cried. "I won't let un catch me!"

"He've not touched me!" Sammy said, serene. He was sure of it, and for him it was as though the mist were the dust of past years.

"I won't let un catch me!" the boy cried again, in triumph. In his fright, to Uncle Sammy, and took his hand. "I won't!" he sobbed. "I won't, I won't, I won't!"

It was the Mystery! "Skipper Jo," the child said, "you be one of they poor folk that can't bide the say, Little Skipper," he said, crooking his arm about the lad's waist, "never cry, Les, sure—you be one of they say catches—like your father—Is, sure."

Thereafter Jo knew the sea for his enemy. There, to his tenth year, when all things were suddenly revealed, he wondered concerning many things; and chief among his perplexities was this: Where did the tide go? Where did the waters bide until they ran back through the tinkle to cover again the slimy harbor bottom?

"But, by!" said Uncle Sammy. "They be a hape o' curious things about the say. Sheer off from they, Is, sure. The tide do go in a hoale in the bottom."

Jo had abandoned that theory months ago; and so he puzzled, until, one day, when he and Ezekiel tilted to-

gether, the punt slipped, at the turn where the shadow of a deep and cold, of the tide, from under the laden lake, into the fading sunshine of the open harbor. Her shadow wriggled to the dull, green depths where the starfish and the warty dories darted, flashing into the security of the black waters beyond. She tugged at her painter like a dog at the leash—backed, fully, and dashed.

"I heered un say—" Jo came to a full stop. "Fugh!" he went on, cunningly. "Think o' all the cursin' you ever heered!"

"No!" Ezekiel said, quickly. "Sure 'tis a sin t' think o' cursin'." Jo grinned. Then, sadly, he said: "This Uncle Job—Iss, sure. Poor Aunt 'Mella Ann'!"

Ezekiel mused. "I low 'tis Uncle Job," he agreed at last. "He's a rotten pale to his punt."

Jo spread the sail, stretched himself in the stern, with his feet on the runways and a lazy hand on the scull oar, and began to sing.

The sun was dropping swiftly, puffing himself up in his precipitate de-

scend to the ragged black clouds that were mounting the sky, taking on a deepening, glowing crimson, the color of flame in dense smoke. The woolly clouds in the east were flushed pink, mottled like a salmon's belly—a borrowed glory that anon fled, leaving a melancholy void. Soon, the whole heaven, from the crest of the black hills far in the unknown inland, to the black horizon in the mysterious expanse where the Grappling Hook grounds, where he've no bottom.

"'Tis barbarous far," Ezekiel regretfully glanced at the little schooner he had made. He had just risked the tide and the wind, and he was in the light wind.

"'Tis not so far as the sun's hoale," "Huh!" "Tis not so handy as Tailor's Noose!"

Jo stirred himself. "Be your caplin spread, by?"

"Is?" "Be un all spread, by?" "Ezekiel plautively.

"Ezekiel hesitated. "Be your caplin spread," he demurred. "Tis a caplin, 'twill be climb a hill t' paddle t' the top."

"The tide—be do." "They be nar a hill t' the say," Ezekiel cried with scorn. "Soon, the whole heaven, from the crest of the black hills far in the unknown inland, to the black horizon in the mysterious expanse where the Grappling Hook grounds, where he've no bottom."

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been seen. He sighed and said in a distracted way:

"As I went up t' London Bridge I met me brother Jan; I cut off his head an' sucked his blood, an' let his body starve."

"Jewberry," said Ezekiel with lack of interest.

"Uh-huh!" said Jo. Then, bethinking himself: "Oh!"

"As I went up t' London Bridge I saw a mighty wonder. Twenty pots a-billin'."

It was a new riddle in Ragged Harbor. "Who give it you, by?" Ezekiel cried.

"Granny Sevier," said Jo. "Iss, sure!" when I took her some trout. She ate she heered un when she were a maid. 'Tis a brook bubblin'."

Ezekiel marveled.

From the body of fog that lurked behind Mad Mull, there dammed in its course from the north, a thick, gray

ness of realizing failure; he saw no trace of a shadow. Thus was his fate—that he the splitting table.

"'Tis past the turn o' the tide," said Jo at last, like a man giving up hope. "Iss, sure!" said Ezekiel, blithely. "Iss, come about."

"Iss, come about," said Jo. The theory had failed. Jo headed the boat for shore. He shaped the course for Gull's Nest, measuring its shore from its fading outline to the probable location of the harbor; then he noted the direction of the wind, feeling it with his ear, his cheek, and the tip of his nose; fixing it thus in his mind. When he looked to Gull's Nest Point again the black mass had vanished.

"Job Luff do say," said Ezekiel, "that the tide bides in a hoale in the say."

"No!" said Jo, sharply. "I low," Ezekiel said with some deference, "he've a hoale t' goa t' hell."

The boy did not perceive the change at all. He was still the same. Thus was his fate—that he the splitting table.

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with a vigor stimulated by his exultation. "I knows—Iss, sure," said he.

"Where the tickle be? Does you?" "Where the tide goa?" Ezekiel asked in mental disappointment.

Jo pointed to the wash in the bottom of the boat as it slipped from stem to stern with the risen lull. Now the waters covered the boy's feet and gurgled and hissed under the keel; now they swirled to Ezekiel's boots, swirling along a chip and a spare toe-clip.

"Tis like the tide—'tis like un," Jo whispered.

"Aye, by, sure," said Ezekiel. "I found un out myself," Jo went on, solemnly. "I'n tell Job Luff now. He thought un were a hoale." Jo laughed softly. "Tis noa hoale. Tis noa hill."

"Tis like that," Ezekiel watched the water ebb and flow. Jo watched the water ebb and flow. Both were in the grip of the mystery—of the great solution which had been yielded to them of all the world.

"When 'tis ebb in Ragged Harbor," said Jo, "tis the flood in—in other parts."

The discovery had fascinated their attention. Lookout and headway were forgotten.

"Where, by?" said Ezekiel. "Pa'ridge 'Pint," Jo answered, readily. "What you sees from the Lookout in a fine time."

"Twillingate, then, I low," said Jo. "Where Manuel's trader comes from. Tis further'n any place."

Ezekiel turned to resume the lookout. Jo gloated in a long, low chuckle. "Port! Keep un off!" The ring of terror was in the scream. "Port! Port!"

"Aye, by," firmly spoken. Ezekiel rose in the bow and raised his hands as though to push the boat back from a danger.

"Port! Port!" "The Rock of the Third Poor Sister took black, towering form in the mist, before and overhead. The punt paused on the crest of a dark, swirling sea. The white depths were like an abyss; she was like a man clinging to the fringe of a precipice. It was a time for the strength of men; in that swift pause the strength of a girl's arms was as no strength at all."

"The sea—'he've coched us!" The wave ran its course, broke with slow might, fell with a crash and a long, thick hiss.

Ezekiel sank to the seat and covered his eyes with his hands, but Jo dropped the oar and bearded the rock and the wave as he had done in the days when he was a plump, fat, round, round, round, and blinched his hands, and his nostrils quivered.

"The sea—'he've coched us," he said again; and it was like a quiet admission of defeat at the hands of a long-fought enemy.

The returning body of water slipped like oil under the boat; it fastened its grip at the punt, lifted the boat, lost it, caught it again, swept it with full force onward and downward.

"Mother!" Ezekiel had forgotten his God. He cried for his mother, who was real and nearer. God had been to him like a crowning shape in the dark corner of the earth. These children had followed the lure of her mystery, which is, to the people of black coasts, like a fair finger beckoning.

It was as though the sea had smiled at their coming, and had said to the mist and the wind, "Gather them in." If there be glory to the sea, it was glory of hidden things; indeed, of isolation and toil are things to escape.

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The Chase of the Tide.

mass overflowed and settled to the surface of the sea. A cloud, high lying, attenuated, impenetrable, rounded the point and crept seaward with meek, deviated current of the wind, its outmost parts swerving to the south, advancing slowly, implacably.

"They be nar a hill t' the say," by, Ezekiel said, impatiently. He glanced apprehensively shoreward.

It had come to Jo that the abode of the tide was hidden of design—an ill-fate, terrible mystery. In the consciousness of presumption he quaked, but he gripped the scull oar tighter and held the boat on her course for the sun.

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